

TANGLED TRAILS

By **WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE**
Author of "A Man Four-Square,"
"Gunlight Pass," etc.
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THIS BEGINS THE STORY
James Cunningham is rich and ruthless. He has a claim on him and knows it. He has a claim on him and knows it. He has a claim on him and knows it.

There grew on him a horror, an eagerness to be gone from the room. It was based on no reasoning, but on some obscure feeling that there had taken place something evil, something that chilled his blood.



AND HERE IT CONTINUES

HE'D RATHER NOT GIVE IT—except to Uncle James himself.

"Better write it," suggested Jack with a reminiscent laugh. "He's a bit impetuous. I saw him throw a man down the stairs yesterday. Picked the fellow up at the foot of the flight. He certainly looked as though he'd like to murder our dear uncle."

"What sort of a reputation has Uncle James' in this way? Have you ever heard of his being in anything of this sort before?"

"No, I haven't," James said promptly. Jack shrugged. "I wouldn't pick snuffy for exacting a moral man."

James arranged a place of meeting for lunch next day. The young cut-throat left. He knew from the fidgety manner of Jack that he had some important business he was anxious to talk over with his brother.

CHAPTER VI

Lights Out

It was five minutes to ten by his watch when Kirby entered the Paradox Apartments. The bulletin board told him that his apartment was 12.

He did not take the self-serve elevator, but the stairs. The hall on the second floor was dark. Since he did not know whether the room he wanted was on this floor or the next he knocked at a door.

Kirby thought he heard the whisper of voices and he knocked again. He rapped on a third time before the door was opened.

"What is it? What do you want?" If ever Lane had seen stark, naked far in a human face, it stared at him out of that of the woman in front of him.

She was a tall, angular woman of a harsh, forbidding countenance, but her eyes were soft and smiling. Behind her further back in the room, the rough rider caught a glimpse of a fat, gross, shaven-faced man fleeing toward the inner door of a bedroom to escape being seen.

"Can you tell me where James Cunningham's apartment is?" asked Kirby. The woman gasped. The hand on the doorknob was trembling violently.

"Head of the stairs—right hand," she managed to get out, then shut the door swiftly in the face of the man whose simple question had so shocked her.

Kirby heard the latch released from its catch. The key in the lock below also turned. "She's takin' no chances," he murmured.

"Now I wonder why both her an' my fat friend are so darned worried. Who were they lookin' for when they opened the door?"

As he took the trends that brought him to the next landing the cut-throat had an impression of a light being flashed off somewhere. He turned to the right as the woman below had directed.

The first door had on the panel a card with his uncle's name. He knocked, and at the same instant noticed that the door was ajar. No answer came. His finger found the electric push button. He could hear it buzzing inside.

"Nobody at home, looks like," he said to himself. "Well, I reckon I'll step in an' leave a note. Or maybe I'll wait. If the door's open he's liable to be right back."

He stepped into the room. It was dark. His finger groped along the wall for the button to throw down light. Before he found it a sound started him.

His first sensation was of relief. This handsome apartment with its Persian rug, its padded easy-chairs, its harmonious wall tints, had a note of repose quite alien to tragedy.

The presiding genius of it was masculine and not feminine. It lacked the touches of adornment that only a woman can give to make a place home-like.

Yet one adornment caught Kirby's eye at once. It was a large photograph in a handsome frame on the table. The picture showed the head and bust of a beautiful woman in evening dress.

She was a brunette, young and very attractive. The line of her head, throat and shoulder was perfect. The delicate, disdainful poise and the gay provocation in the dark, slanting eyes were enough to tell that she was no novice in the game of sex.

He judged her an expensive orchid produced in the civilization of our twentieth century. Across the bottom of the picture was scrawled an initial in a fashionably angular hand.

Lane moved closer to read it. The words were, "Always, Phyllis." Probably this was the young woman to whom rumor were true, James Cunningham, Senior, was engaged.

On the floor, near where Kirby had been lying, lay a heavy piece of agate. Kirby picked it up. It was a smooth stone and greenish. Instantly that this was the weapon which had established contact with the girl. Very likely the woman's hand had closed on it when she was coming.

She had switched off the light and waited for him. That the blow had found a vulnerable mark and knocked him out had been sheer luck. Kirby passed into a luxurious bedroom beyond which was a tiled bathroom. He glanced these over and returned to the outer apartment. There was still another door. It was closed.

As the man from Wyoming moved toward it he felt once more a strange sensation of dread. It was strong enough to stop him in his stride. What was he going to find behind that door? When he laid his hand on the knob pinpricks played over his scalp and galloped down his spine.

He opened the door. A sweet sickish odor, pungent, but not heavy, greeted his nostrils. It was a familiar smell, one he had met only recently. Where? His memory jumped to a corridor of the Cheyenne hospital. He had been passing the operating room on his way to see Wild Rose. The door had opened and there had been waiting to him faintly the penetrating whiff of chloroform.

It was the same drug he sniffed now. He stood on the threshold, groped for the switch, and flashed on the lights. Sound though Kirby Lane's nerves were, he could not repress a gasp at what he saw.

Leaning back in an armchair, looking up at him with a horrible sardonic grin, was Uncle James Cunningham. His wrists were tied with ropes to the arms of the chair. A towel, passed around his throat, fastened the body to the back of the chair and propped up the head. A bloody clot of hair hung tangled just above the temple.

This man was dead beyond any possibility of doubt. There was a small hole in the center of the forehead through which a bullet had crashed. Beneath this was a thin trickle of blood that had run into the heavy eyebrows.

The dead man was wearing a plaid smoking jacket and osblood slippers. On the table close to his hand lay a half-smoked cigar. There was a gruesome suggestion in the tilt of the head and the gargoyle grin that this was a hideous and shocking jest he was playing on the world.

Kirby snatched his eyes from the grim spectacle and looked round the room. It was evidently the private den of the owner of the apartment retinol. There were facilities for smoking and for drinking, a lounge which showed marks of wear and a writing-desk in one corner.

This desk held the young man's gaze. It was open. Papers lay scattered everywhere and two corners had been rifled and fished on the floor. Some one, in a desperate hurry, had searched every pigeon-hole.

The window of the room was open. Perhaps it had been thrown up to get out the fumes of the chloroform. Kirby stepped to it and looked down. The fire escape ran past it to the stories above and below.

The cut-throat man had seen more than once the tragelias of the range. He had heard the bark of guns and had looked down on quiet dead men, but a minute before full of lusty life. But these had been victims of warfare in the open, usually of sudden passions that had flared and struck. This was different. It was murder, deliberate, cold-blooded, atrocious. The man had been tied up, made helpless and done to death with quiet mercy. There was a note of the abnormal in the manner about the affair. Whoever had killed James Cunningham deserved the extreme penalty of the law.

He was a man who no doubt had made many enemies. Always he had demanded his pound of flesh and got it. Some one had waited patiently for his hour and exacted fearful vengeance or whatever wrong he had sinned.

where he had been playing in a pool tournament. He stopped Lane. "Can you lead me a match, friend?"

The cut-throat handed him three or four and started to go. "Just a mo'," the newspaperman said, striking a light. "Do you always"—puff, puff—"leave your rooms"—puff, puff, puff—"by the fire escape?"

Kirby looked at him in silence, thinking furiously. He had been caught, after all. There were witnesses to prove he had gone up to his uncle's room. Here was another to testify he had left by the fire escape. The best he could say was that he was very unlucky.

"Never mind, friend," the newspaperman went on. "You don't look like a second-story worker to yours truly." He broke into a little amused chuckle. "I reckon friend husband, who never comes home till Saturday night, happened around unexpectedly and the fire escape looked good to you. Am I right?"

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Lane took his advice without delay. The gloves were still in his hand. He thrust it into his pocket as he began the descent. The iron ladder ran down the building to the alley. It ended ten feet above the ground. Kirby lowered himself and dropped. He turned to the right down the alley toward Glenarm street.

A man was standing at the corner of the alley trying to light a cigar. He was in his hand, close to his ear, just returning from the Press Club, through him and stepped his supple strength like an illness. It was not possible that Rose could have done this in her right mind. But he had heard a doctor say once that under stress of great emotion people sometimes went momentarily insane. His friend had been greatly wrought up from anxiety, pain, fever and lack of sleep.

He had been trained to swift thought reactions. Quickly, but noiselessly, he stepped to the door and released the catch of the Yale lock so that it would not open from the outside without a key. He switched off the light and passed through the living-room into the bedroom. His whole desire now was to be alone in the building as soon as possible. The bedroom also he darkened before he stepped to the window and crept through it to the platform of the fire escape.

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